

"Creating a Genuine "Opportunity Society"

**by Representative Shannon J. Augare**

Testimony before the United States Congress

Appropriations Sub-committee on Rural Development,

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Chairwoman DeLauro, members of this committee, thank you for calling this hearing to discuss what is a very important topic not only to those of us that live in rural communities, but to the nation as a whole.

This past century, American policy has been driven by a broad-based national commitment to expanding economic opportunity and enlarging the circle of those who share in the country's prosperity.

Acknowledging this enormous achievement is not to say that this process worked for everyone. Some groups, such as Native Americans and those that live in rural communities face additional obstacles... prominently prejudice and isolation.

In the nation's earlier economy, if a company product was in demand, the size of the workforce would grow and workers' wage and benefit demands would more likely be met. But, that correlation no longer exists throughout much of today's economy.

Global industries allows companies to increase productivity while reducing their workforce, and outsourcing enables profits to grow by sending American jobs abroad. Rural America has always struggled to attract good paying jobs to our communities. Today it is even harder to get American companies to invest business resources in Rural America.

The trends that are evident in today's economy demonstrate that a larger role for government is needed if we are to insure that all children enjoy the same widespread economic opportunity which, perhaps, your generation did. Economic growth in urban and rural communities needs to rise together. It is important that public policy works to foster a broadly shared prosperity.

As an enrolled member of the Blackfeet Indian Nation and a resident of rural-frontier America, my vision for the future includes a continuing commitment to the enduring principles that vastly expand economic opportunity and social justice.

First, we must create new and meaningful jobs for all Americans.

Government must provide incentives for American companies to invest business resources in rural America. Government must find ways to assist American businesses to overcome the transportation disincentives of isolated rural communities. New energy policies, energy tax credits and fuel efficient modes of transportation for the distribution of product is essential before business-manufacturing can cost effectively re-locate in rural and frontier America.

Citizens are leaving rural communities because the communities themselves are failing. They are failing to provide essential services necessary for a sustainable community. One such essential service is health care. When a rural resident has to drive 2-3 hours for basic health care services a community is not sustainable.

We must find a way to recruit health care providers in our rural communities. Rural citizens should have equal access to health insurance. Small companies that exist in rural communities should not have to pay a premium for their insurance just because they do not have large group numbers. The current system ignores the medical needs and access to health care services for 47 million of our fellow rural citizens.

The greatest squandering of human capital in our nation is in the students who leave school. Nearly equally as serious are our highschool graduates and college graduates who can not find jobs in rural communities. In spite of the fact that they have completed their education the sign is up "NO help needed." As an example of one rural community, my community, the unemployment rate is 79%.

Next, we must assure greater job security.

In this economy with its churning labor market, security comes not through the guarantee of the same job throughout your career, but through the ability to find a new job. This issue is a crisis in rural communities where few businesses exist and as a result few jobs exist.

Financial sustainability is not just about earning. It is also about the ability of families to grow their earnings. Many rural residents have historically relied on their land to provide this resource. As fewer rural residents are earning their living off the land, retirement investments are more important. Many rural families live below the poverty line so saving is not all possible. Many rural families live in trailers and manufactured homes that do not appreciate in value. Family asset failure means parents are not able to assist their children with their future. This means rural families have to rebuild their wealth every generation.

One of the best forms of family asset development is home ownership. Yet about a third of all families – and half of minority families – cannot afford to own their own home. And as I mentioned, in rural communities many homes do not appreciate in value. Rural and native families like many Americans face staggering debt load, poor credit habits and the inability to save for down payments. Creative programs, like Individual Development Accounts - tie financial education and credit repair with downpayment matching funds are an effective way to move rural Americans into homeownership.

Bottom line, Rural America is an important part of America... please do not forget us. Thank you, madam Chairwoman and members of the committee for your attention to this matter.

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